

November 29, 2009

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 21: 25-36 with Jeremiah 33: 12-16

"Signs"

M. Night Shyamalan wrote, produced and directed the 2002 science thriller movie entitled *"Signs"* starring Mel Gibson, Joaquin Phoenix, Rory Culkin and Abigail Breslin. Perhaps, as did I, you saw the film which was about a family living on a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. If such was the case, it's possible that you as well as other members of the theater audience at that time were periodically frightened to the point of covering your eyes or screaming right out loud.

As you undoubtedly remember, following the tragic death of his wife, the main character Graham Hess and his children are living a relatively peaceful existence in their rural home. The calm is interrupted when a mysterious crop circle appears in Graham's cornfield. Immediate speculation is that said circle is surely the handiwork of local pranksters. But when animal behavior turns from placid to violent and a series of strange events begin to happen in various local places, fear mounts and rumors of an alien invasion are heard. The many and varied signs continue to be observed and heard, the drama builds, aliens do in fact appear and create havoc, and one manages to hold Graham's young son hostage. Though lives have been interrupted in extraordinary ways, there is relative calm as the film reaches its conclusion.

It's funny how signs continue to be predicted, watched for and ignored. Jeremiah and Jesus foretold coming events, some which were quite hopeful while others, as in the movie, more than a little unsettling. And there were the predictable ones like those seen in nature. We know that as days become shorter, leaves will fall from branches, winds will increase, skies darken and snow will eventually fall from the heavens. Since all of these are normal, they don't alarm us in any way. But when we think of end times we tend to do one of two things: disregard or hunker down in a bunker.

A few years ago, an elderly resident of a nursing home was found fully dressed sitting expectantly in her chair at bedtime. The staff person who discovered her chided: "Lucy, what are you doing? You know it's time for bed. Now let's get you into your night gown."

With a smile on her face, Lucy responded: "No, I'm waiting for Jesus. He's coming tonight."

Following her announcement, the attendant figuratively rolled her eyes then insisted that Lucy prepare not for Jesus but for bed. After some resistance, Lucy, the weaker of the two, was forced to give in, dress in night clothes and get into bed. The staff person left but when she looked in the room a short time later, Lucy was dead. Her expression was peaceful for Jesus had, as she earlier predicted, come for her. Then it was that the attendant realized she had ignored the signs.

According to a story which is assumed to be true, on a brilliant day some 220 years ago the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session. Because the sun was high in the sky, delegates were able to work by the natural light. However, right in the middle of debate the unexpected happened. An eclipse of the sun caused everything to become quite dark. Immediately some of the legislators were convinced that the second coming of Christ was at hand. Thus a bit of an uproar arose. Some gathered wanted to adjourn immediately. Others wanted to pray in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

It was the speaker of the House, a Christian, who, as the story goes, “rose to the occasion with good logic and good faith. We are all upset by the darkness, he said, and some of us are afraid. But ‘the Day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought.’” (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *The Christian Century*, December 6, 2000)

On this day, the First Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves standing between right smack between the birth and death of Jesus, his first and second coming. Of course, most of us decent and orderly Presbyterians aren’t much into end times. We leave such discussions to the imaginations of Pentecostals and screenwriters. In fact, right now there is a film entitled “2012” which, if my understanding is correct, is about the end of the world. I watched a brief trailer on the web and immediately determined that I most certainly would not be counted in the numbers flocking to see the movie. And even though I saw Will Smith in the flesh walking through New York City’s seaport area during the filming of “I Am Legend,” I couldn’t quite bring myself to see that one either. My own reasons are pretty straightforward. For me, movies and books attempting to capture the apocalypse are just plain scary. And, to date, known of them have been accurate. Plus it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

High school English teacher Leonard Beechy commenting on the lectionary passages for this day thinks of this time between the first and second comings of Christ as twilight time. “Celtic folk called it,” Beechy writes, “the time between the times, the enchanted moments at dusk and at dawn when the veil between his world and the world beyond us is thin, and we seem to breathe its air...The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the ‘already’ of Christ’s reign and the ‘not yet’ of Advent.” (Leonard Beechy, *The Christian Century*, November 17, 2009, p. 21)

So how do we contemporary people of faith live in this “time between the times”? How do we handle the tension between being preparing and fearing? What are the signs we think we see and hear as opposed to the signs we are missing?

While preparing this message the Spirit began nudging me with some determination. Or so it seemed to me. In the stillness of a particular night last week, the time when all voices and sounds are silent and God has my complete attention, there was a new awareness. As much

as I give attention to the signs of the changing seasons and prepare for meetings and services, Advent and Christmas, with some expertise I fail, perhaps deliberately, to note warnings of things to come. It's far more comfortable for me to ignore or deny situations and conditions that might threaten the status quo. How about you? Are there signs you might be ignoring or preparations you are failing to make?

A few minutes ago I addressed personal avoidance of movies and books about the apocalypse. I did, however, read and appreciate Cormack McCarthy's post-apocalyptic story The Road, a book recently made into a film. It is a very dark tale of a man and his son moving along one road or another in what remains of the world. The two are attempting to survive in any way possible. It now occurs to me, as the dots come together, that along with being frightened by end time scenarios, I also become depressed for there seems to be no hope. Though I can't say with any certainty what is in the minds of authors and screenwriters, I wonder if they're just trying to grasp biblical messages or have they thrown in the towel?

Even though both Jeremiah and Jesus proclaimed the coming destruction of Jerusalem, they also carried messages of hope. The end of one era would be followed by a more glorious and peaceful one. Both the prophet and Jesus called the people to be alert, to pay attention to the signs, like the fig tree and other trees, around them. There would be grief in one time followed by joy in another...the time between end times and beginning times.

According to Jeremiah: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

Jesus said: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Following the tragedy at Fort Hood in Texas there has been much discussion about behavioral signs of the alleged shooter that were possibly overlooked or simply dismissed. An investigation is, as you know, in progress which may very well lead to charges being made against one or more persons. It is not my interest nor is it my intent to engage in commentary. Rather, I point only to our very human natures that want to avoid the unpleasant. Hopefully a lesson has been learned and people everywhere will become more alert and attentive.

The signs of the season are everywhere. Banners hang. Trees stand adorned. Lights shine from roof tops and windows. Music fills the air. We stand in the in-between-time, addressing our shortcomings, letting go of all that gets in the way of our faith, and preparing for the beauty that is promised, the Child who will bring new life to a dying world.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down...with the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly...Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

It is Advent, as Leonard Beechy reminds us, the “time between times when the veil between worlds grows thin and the holy calls to us from the world to come.” (Ibid.)